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A TRIVIAL WORK OF ART

"TAP-ROOM SCENE IN HOLLAND" BY TENIERS

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THERE is not much to be said of this work beyond that it is skilful painting and a trivial creation.

It is one of Teniers' works of which we are told that it belonged to the lot which was placed in the ante-chamber of Louis XIV during an absence of a few days. On his return they disgusted him so that he cried out: "*Otez-moi ces magots là!*"—take away those monkeys there!

As mere craftsmanship it has great charm. It is also an example of rational, unoffensive individualism of manner in painting. In walking through the Louvre one can single out a Teniers at sight—not merely by his choice of Dutch low-life subjects but by his manner of painting or technique, which is really fine. It is rich, simple, direct and full of modest dexterity; it is devoid of all clap-trap "peculiarity" and impertinent assertion and parading of self; it is admirably adapted to the telling of his stories.

Hence it is at once an individualistic yet a universal manner, one in which the universal appeal is made to dominate the personal charm. Hence it is perfect as mere craftsmanship.

Had Teniers used his talent in painting to produce sublime creations instead of pot-house pictures, he would have become a great artist also, instead of remaining merely a great painter. However, let us take him to our intellectual heart. For he is expressive of the low life of his time. As such he is an unctuous historian of Dutch low life and full of interest to the mind; only "let us put things in their places" as the French say. Let us not mistake; and, while not at all despising his triviality—since the trivial, when simple, direct, unhypocritical and skilful is often admirable—let us not place his trivial works upon the same level with those of the great kings of art.

A DEGENERATE WORK OF ART

"TORSO OF A YOUNG WOMAN" BY RENOIR

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WHEN we say a work of art is degenerate we do not mean to say that all the works of the man who made the work in question are degenerate. We mean only that the work in question is degenerate. Many, even great artists, have made degenerate works and paid the penalty.

Why is this work by Renoir a degenerate work? Because it is full of the fact of de-formation of the form and of a vulgar spirit. It is a piece of mannerism. It is a manner of painting which whether consciously adopted or unconsciously drifted into and then defended by him, is a sign of intellectual aberration.

The manner manifested in this picture by Renoir is totally different from his manner in other fine things he painted. Why did he adopt this manner? No one can say. Only one reason is apparent to a normal man—a desire to merely parade a new-fangled, personal and peculiar species of tricks in brush-work or painting. To do that he chose to paint the nude torso of a woman. Why did he not, like Fouace or Vollon, great masters of brush-work, choose some fish and beer bottles—since mere stunting in paint seems to have been his sole aim?

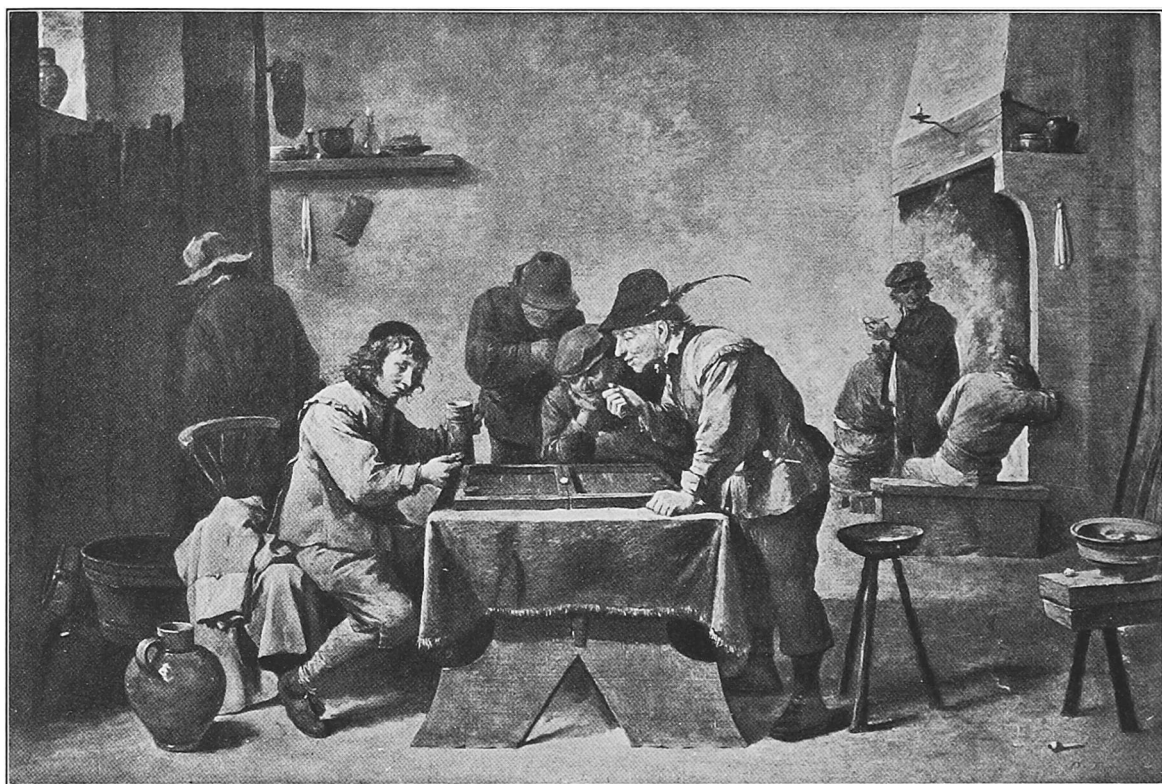
To do this stunt he slurred the drawing of the entire figure. The hands seem scarcely to exist; the breasts are more like rubber balloons and the face looks as if it had been half burned away in a fire. Then the skin looks more like the hide of a leopard than of a human being. It is supposed to represent, we think, sunshine and shadow; but falls woefully short of the truth. Then the background looks like a spotted hay-stack. If the American public saw the work itself in Paris it would soon per-

ceive that the color is not at all true to nature—is not flesh, but mere painty-paint.

Says the same writer quoted above: "Monet's joy in light becomes with Renoir an affectation. He has not the simple love of truth of his comrade. He falls into exaggeration which betrays conscious purpose and straining after originality. His two 'Young Girls' at a piano have the color of cranberry syrup; his nude figure of a woman [the one we are considering] on whose skin lights and shadows play so unfortunately that she looks as if beaten black and blue, in places even as if studded with the corpse-stains of putrescence in the second degree."

But, worst of all, it degrades the divine beauty of perfect womanhood to ugliness and so destroys the basis of the only reverence we can have for the body of a woman by vulgarizing it. And it needs no argument to prove that, once a woman becomes vulgar, she has lost her reason for being. Moreover, to vulgarize woman in art is to degrade her and the civilization of which she is through human fatality the corner-stone. That is to debase art to the lowest level, because it is absolutely destructive in its tendency to the social well-being we have achieved, not to speak of social progress we still hope for. Only by idealizing and actually lifting womanhood can social progress be hoped for. This is so simple an axiom that it is amazing so many artists cannot see it.

So then, this work is true to nothing, neither to beauty nor good painting, nor good drawing. It is merely an incarnation of one man's peculiar whimsicalities in paint. This and nothing more. It is ugly, disappointing and disheartening to all but

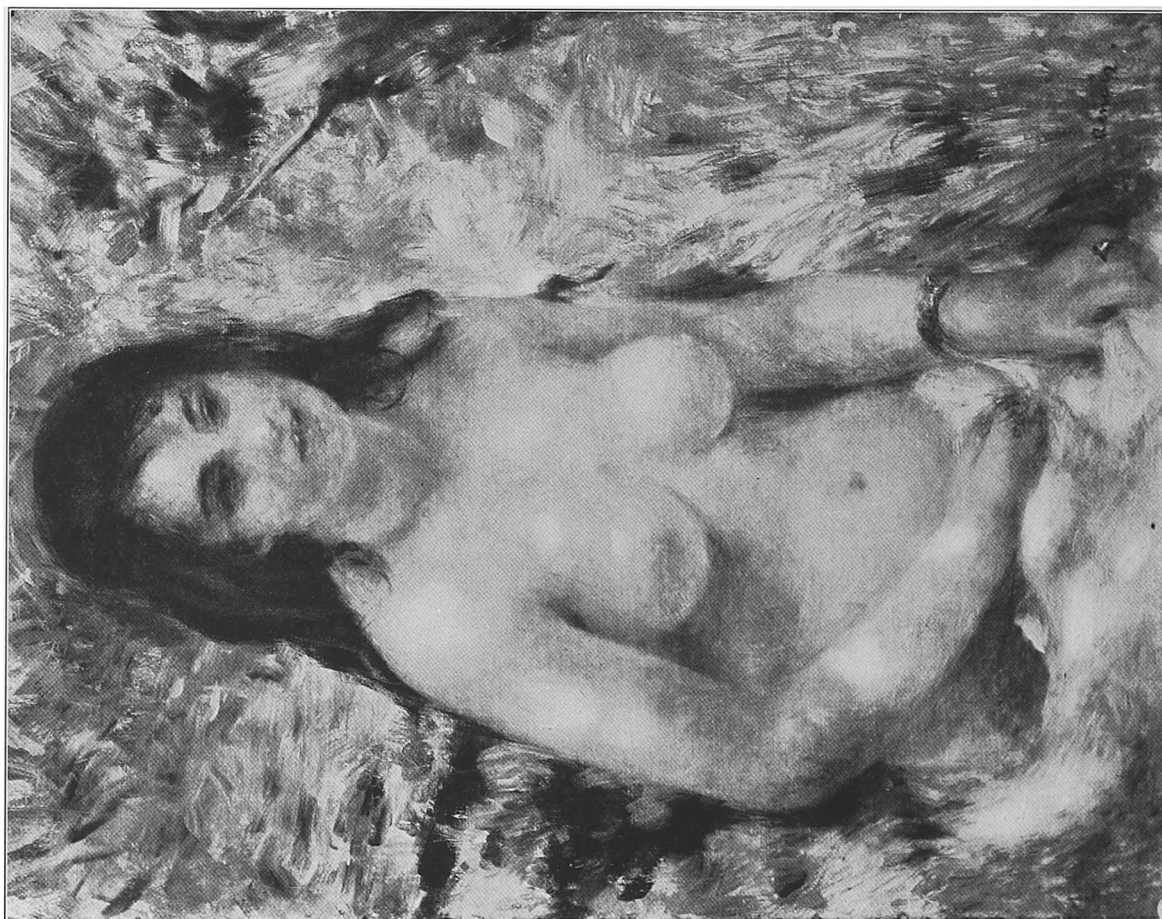


TAP-ROOM SCENE IN HOLLAND

BY TENIERS

A Trivial Work of Art

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"TORSO OF A YOUNG WOMAN"

BY RENOIR

A Degenerate Work

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